IN THE CLASSROOM

Letting Go

Kevin Junod, Centennial Elementary, Harrison School District 2

ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING TASKS as a teacher has been changing perspectives and methods to be more problem-solving based. During my first year of teaching, my teammates and I taught our students computations. We thought having our students simply solve a calculation correctly was true understanding of mathematics. Teaching just computations to rote memory was easy to teach and felt rewarding. I felt like I was an amazing teacher because almost all of my students were "successful." I failed my students when they solved story problems or any problem that did not have an obvious equation to solve. My students were unsuccessful at these problems because the problems were too complex for them to identify the process to the solution. I realized I had taught my students to be like computers. If they saw a problem a certain way, they would be successful. Like a computer, when one thing differed from the known and expected, my students couldn't successfully solve the problem.

As my district began to rewrite our curriculum maps to mirror the expectations of Common Core State Standards, I began to research how my teaching style would have to change. I found my approach that first year was the complete opposite of what I would need to become. I realized I would have to transition to this new style of teaching. I did not then know the challenge I was facing

I began by planning my lessons differently. I intentionally placed more complex concepts throughout the lesson to help challenge my students. As anticipated, my students were stumped and stared at me like I gave them a problem in a foreign language. I then realized I was going to have to teach my students problem solving strategies to help identify the process to the solution. I began modeling how I would make sense out of complex problem. I was surprised that with this questioning and brainstorming as a group, it took over 10 minutes for just one problem. Deciding this was too long for a single problem, we would usually skip the next challenging problem and just accomplish the modeling problem. I kept trying to quicken the pacing of the modeling to squeeze in time for students to apply, but I never accomplished this. Thinking the most important component of a lesson was the practicing of computation problems still, I decided there was not enough time in the lesson for modeling and practicing of difficult problems.

Learning to let go of both the ideology that students need repeated practice of problems and the control of my classroom was the biggest challenge in creating a classroom that focused on problem solving skills. I had to learn to let my students fail on problems repeatedly to the point of frustration to allow them an opportunity to improve on their problem-solving skills. Just allowing them to struggle was not enough; I had to anticipate their struggles and create guiding questions that would support them in solving the problem. The transition from helping students with complex problems to letting them fail repeatedly was crucial and troublesome. Teachers want to be there to support their students and help them fix their mistakes, but by doing this I never allowed my students to learn how to catch and fix their mistakes on their own. They became dependent on me to be there to guide them through strenuous problems and tasks in my classroom. As I became better at this, I noticed that my students were gaining a better and deeper understanding of the material. They were also gaining a strong sense of accomplishment because they were able to do this without my help. Some of my students still depend upon me for assistance with complex problems, but for the majority of my students I have become more of a facilitator. This switch has made teaching more rewarding than having my students receive a problem, solve the problem, and then rinse and repeat.